

Youth Safety and Resilience Initiative:
Focus Group Analysis and
Suggested Recommendations

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Executive Summary

Background

On May 12, 2022, Luis Mejia Hernandez lost his life after being stabbed in a large fight at Bradlee Shopping Center. Luis was 18 years old and just eleven days from graduating from Alexandria City High School.

In response to this violence, Alexandria Mayor Justin Wilson and Councilwoman Alyia Gaskins drafted a memorandum, known as the Youth Safety and Resilience Concept, that called upon City staff to increase access to support youth mental health, to further coordinate across sectors to identify challenges, needs, and opportunities, target investments at identified gaps, develop sustainable strategies to align services and existing initiatives, center equity, and take a whole community approach to engage the public and private sector's participation in supporting Alexandria's youth. In the memorandum, Wilson and Gaskins said, "We must engage a diverse range of stakeholders to listen to the experiences of our young people, learn what is at the root of youth trauma and violence, and act."

In June, Alexandria City Manager Jim Parajon, appointed Kate Garvey, Director of the Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS), and Jaqueline Tucker, Race and Social Equity Officer, to lead the effort with the City School Staff Group. The City School Staff Group is made up of representatives from key organizations that work with youth, including DCHS, ACPS, RPCA, Libraries, the Health Department, the Police Department, Court Services Unit, and the Race and Social Equity Office. Since then, qualitative data has been collected from seven focus groups with youth that was used to inform recommendations for key actions. This Report provides a summary of those data and recommendations.

Methodology

Focus Groups

Between July and November, seven focus groups with 125 youth were conducted. Two groups were held over the summer (one virtual and one in-person) with 70 youth who participated in the Teens Work! Program. The other focus groups were held between October and November with already existing youth groups that were recruited through the Youth Services Coordinating Council. Liberty's Promise, the Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities, the Library Teen Advisory Group, the Campagna Center; and Keep It 360 were the groups that were involved.

Approach

Each focus group asked the same 19 questions. Six questions pertained to their knowledge and participation in youth programs; five questions were asked about the places and elements that make them feel safe or unsafe; six questions were about youth outreach, engagement, and working with adults; and two questions sought their interest in participating in future youth engagement initiatives.

Participant Demographics

Providing demographic data for the youth participants was optional. Fifty-four participants provided their demographic data, of whom, 50% identified as Black, not Hispanic, 28% identified as Hispanic, and 22% identified as White, not Hispanic. Of the forty-six participants who provided their grade level, 48% were in middle school (6th-8th grade) and 52% were in high school (9-12th grade). Of the 35 participants who provided their gender identity, 23% identified as male, 71% identified as female, 3% identified as transgendered, and 3% identified as non-binary.

Key Areas of Feedback

The youth who participated in the focus groups provided significant feedback and guidance on ways to focus on their safety and resilience. They shared the most effective ways to reach them and best places to reach them—electronic communication and in school; the program elements that they value most—empowerment, college and career prep; what makes them feel safe—strong relationships; and where they feel safe—home, school, and community.

Key Recommendations

Based on the feedback that was collected from the youth focus groups, the following is a summary of key recommendations for future action:

1. Youth programs should be creative, inclusive, and flexible and should foster social connection and a sense of belonging and promote youth behavioral health.
2. Youth safety and resilience can be promoted by supporting the city-wide adoption of the developmental assets framework, establishing strong support systems at school, and co-creating solutions with youth.
3. Use a variety of methods and partnerships to creatively engage young people and ensure that youth are fully aware of the resources and programs available to them.
4. Build effective Youth-Adult Partnerships by providing adults with ongoing trainings and technical assistance to promote positive youth development, and by providing youth with a strong foundation and ongoing opportunities to participate in decision and policy making with adults.
5. When asking youth for their input and feedback, it is critical that adults listen, take their ideas seriously, and hold themselves accountable to respond to their concerns.

To successfully support Alexandria's youth and promote their safety and resiliency, it is necessary for systems to work collaboratively and to demonstrate a commitment to youth success and resilience. Bringing about lasting, transformative change requires all organizations to recognize the value of working with youth and listening to their concerns, interests and ideas is fundamental to this change. As systems are designed to empower youth, key questions that will assist in moving to greater equity are:

- What are the policies and practices that are causing our young people harm?
- How are we engaging youth to solve these problems?
- Where can we share more of the decision-making power with youth?

Key Next Steps to Advance Effort:

- Hiring of Youth Engagement Specialist (complete)
- Launching of the Youth Ambassador Program (complete)
- Initiation of youth design of Youth and Parent Summit (in process)
- Identification of key next steps driven by Summit feedback
- Implementation of immediate next steps and identification of resource gaps
- Sharing of recommendations with School Board and City Council
- Exploration of integration of Youth Ambassador Program throughout City and School structures
- Ongoing engagement with youth and parents

Youth Safety and Resilience Report

Key Findings

Youth Programming Awareness and Participation

Youth participants were asked about their awareness of and participation in youth focused programs in Alexandria. There was mixed response, with some participants having very positive experiences and others having limited awareness of programs or not recognizing the names of programs.

The programs that were recognized or identified by the participants included:

Alexandria Youth Council, AVID, Boys and Girls Club, Campagna Performing Arts Academy, community service opportunities, Children, Youth, and Families Collaborative Commission Executive Committee, Family, Career and Community Leaders of America, Four Mile Conservation George Mason University program, Girls Circle, Girls Group, JROTC, Kat Camp, Keep It 360, Key Club, Liberty's Promise, Link Club, Mayor's Campaign to End Bullying, Peer Advisors, Project Discovery, Robotics Program, Sexual Assault Center, Summer Youth Employment Program, Talented and Gifted, The Untouchables, YMCA, Youth Leadership Conference, and Youth Speak Up Event.

The most common way that participants had heard about a program was through their connection to another institution (school, a Rec Center, Peer Advocate Program, Volunteer Alexandria, Library, NoVA Community College, Building Better Futures, CYFCC Summer Programs, Workforce Development Center, and Brent Place) or people (teacher, parent, program leader, or friend). Teachers were the most common source of information. Several participants said that they learned about a program via a newsletter, mail, or by school email. One participant said that they find resources on their own by searching on the City's website.

Program Satisfaction

Participants largely shared what they liked about these programs:

- **Youth Voice and Empowerment:** a space to voice their opinion and feel heard; the opportunity to be a leader and playing an important role in their community; networking/working with adults;
- **College and Career Development:** gaining more knowledge and exposure about pathways/options to college and careers;
- **Compensation:** gainful employment or a way to gain volunteer hours;
- **Social Connectedness, DEI, and Supportive Adults:** helpful staff; making new friends; fun and inclusive; and the ability to communicate and work as a team.
- **Cultural and Enrichment Activities:** programs that offered dance, music, and the option to join majorette teams, marching bands, and basketball and football teams.

Youth did not like when a resource or program wasn't advertised enough, resulting in a lack of awareness of quality programs. Participants also shared that they didn't like when a program was too short, had age restrictions for their siblings, and when they are interrupted during the program.

Program Elements/Resources Valued

The programs/resources that were identified the most among participants were ones that helped students with:

- **Preparing for life after graduation:** what to expect; college prep; programs for parents of first-generation students; funding for SAT tutoring; and a lot more staff at the college and career center who can offer more support with college, career, and scholarship assistance
- **Emotional/mental health support:** equipping teachers and adults with how to help youth who are struggling with their mental health and a general understanding that students are struggling with their mental health, making it difficult for them to learn; raising awareness of youth mental health; helping youth cope with uncertainty; someone to talk to about their mental health and how to deal with stress, school safety, anxiety, and eating disorders
- **Homework:** tutoring; peer to peer tutoring; where to get homework help and free books/supplies; and more educational programs that are accessible to all
- **Programs for immigrant youth:** supporting them to speak up, meet youth from different cultures, and to learn English (English classes for new arrivals on the West End)
- **Building vocational skills/finding job:** computer programming/coding/robotics; medical jobs; automotive jobs, entrepreneurship
- **Arts and culture:** music programs, culture club
- **Building life skills:** how to set and accomplish goals
- **Social events that build community**
- **Sex Ed:** pregnancy prevention
- **Other ideas included:** scaling up the **Keep It 360 program** to reach more youth with prevention information; a **“Safe Space”** that’s open 24/7; an **“all sports team;”** and more programs that elevate **youth voice and promote inclusivity.**

Youth Safety

The elements that were identified the most among participants that help youth feel safe had to do with **relationships** - having friends and family present, having “close relationships at school,” and knowing their neighbors/people around them. Participants shared that Lunch and Learn was a time when they could build these relationships with their teachers and counselors, so that there was concern that those opportunities were taken away. Youth also mentioned feeling safer when in spaces where there is “inclusivity and diversity” meaning there are people and peers who look like them in the space.

Participants also mentioned that having their **phone** with them provides a “sense of security to contact anyone immediately.” In terms of school safety, the school shooting at Uvalde was at top of mind for some, so they mentioned needing **strong support systems** in place at school, more **supportive teachers and adults** to talk to, **effective policies and procedures** to ensure school safety, and having **accurate and timely information** was important. Participants named bullying prevention education and school doors that lock automatically help them feel safe.

The **local news coverage** of crime rates also plays a role in creating safe communities. A couple of participants said that feeling safe meant that they could walk around at night comfortably. **Security guards and “police presence”** was mentioned. Other participants mentioned **“faith,” “feeling heard,” “libraries providing a quiet space,” and “home”** as elements that make a place feel safe.

The theme that emerged regarding not feeling safe the most was the **recent violence that had occurred at or near school**. Some of the direct comments included:

“It’s scary to think about the boy who was stabbed, and I think it’s possible for it to happen again at school.” “When I feel unsafe, it comes from the school environment, especially what’s been going on with King Street Campus. I always have an extra security barrier when I go to school. My parents do, too. Now more than ever, I feel unsafe.” Hearing about violence at school, “events at ACHS,” school announcements about safety, and school security officers with guns making inappropriate comments all contribute to students feeling unsafe at school.

Another related theme that emerged frequently was **school policy changes** in response to violence. For example, participants felt like the **elimination of the Lunch and Learn program was detrimental**. Participants also pointed to “**locked restrooms**” and “**police presence**” as elements that don’t make school feel safe. Some participants mentioned that bullying is not something that they ever deal with, at least as they get older.

Other prominent themes when it comes to not feeling safe were **community violence** – youth are afraid to be alone, especially at night. This could be because, as many participants noted, the **news and social media** “makes peoples’ anxiety worse by trying to get our attention with extremism.” The news “overexaggerates things” and the spread of **misinformation** makes people feel unsafe. Finally, gun control was another prominent theme among participants. Easy access to guns and the **presence of guns and weapons** makes youth feel unsafe.

Where in Alexandria Youth Feel Safe

Community. The community spaces where participants cited as feeling safe included: the Library and quiet places where youth would not be bothered, basketball courts and soccer practice, crowded public spaces, DC Museums, the Library, Market Square and Old Town, parks, Rec Centers, and near the Pentagon because of military presence. Police presence and police building relationships with the community was cited as contributing to community safety. Some participants, however, noted that police presence makes some people feel safe and other people not safe.

Home. “Home” is where most participants feel safe.

Schools. Some participants cited their school - or places and practices in the school - as a source of safety. “The school library,” “drills and practice,” “metal detectors” and “security guards” were mentioned as elements that make a school feel safe. “When students get along and don’t get into problems/conflicts with one another.” It was mentioned that there “Needs to be more mental health helpers available at school.”

People/Relationships. For some participants, the place wasn’t so important as the people they are with who make them feel safe. “People that I trust,” “my friends,” “family/relatives” “students getting along,” “teachers,” and being surrounded by a “strong community of people who support you,” all create a sense of safety. Participants feel safe when the people around them are “good listeners” and there’s a sense of unity, acceptance, and belonging, “no matter where we came from.”

Youth Outreach and Engagement

Outreach Methods

The best way to reach youth, according to the participants, are (in order of most to least mentioned): **electronically** (apps like “Minga” and “Power School,” emails, eNewsletters, and the use of social media was the most mentioned method); through **school** and **school-based programs** (teachers, Canvas and Blackboard, school outreach, visiting classes, and posting announcements); **Phone calls and text messages** (using English and Spanish); **Word of mouth and in person methods** (via friends and family, peer to peer communication, and from someone they trust); **the City’s website; afterschool program;** and the **news** are all ways to reach youth with information about resources, opportunities, programs, events.

Outreach Places

Schools are the best place to reach youth, according to the focus group participants. “Schools” was mentioned more than any other place. Posting flyers at schools, specifically in the cafeteria, help, as well as school counselors and using TV media – Titan TV and student reporting to share information with students.

Businesses were a close second, after schools, as ways to reach youth. These places include shopping centers Bradlee Shopping Center, McDonalds and Starbucks at Bradlee Shopping Center, coffee shops in Old Town, and the Springfield and Pentagon Malls.

Sporting Events were the third most mentioned place to reach youth – outdoor sports arenas and skate parks. **Rec Centers and Libraries** were also named. **Other places** included: Tenants and Workers United, afterschool programs, movie theaters, community meetings, places with food, adults, phone calls, and door to door canvassing were also noted.

Outreach Timing

Afterschool hours was cited as the best time to reach youth, although the day of the week varied (weekdays, weekends, Friday afternoons, and Saturdays were named). This was closely followed by **“School Announcements”** throughout the school day to inform students because, as one participant so aptly put it, “because I am at school every day.” A couple of participants mentioned evenings and mornings as options, too.

The best way for adults to gather youth input

Phones were named as the best way to gather input, that taking surveys on their phone is preferred by most. Another method that was identified was through **Focus Groups/Listening Sessions** if done in-person. Zoom is not preferable. If participants were **compensated for their time**, that would also make this method even more preferable. Some participants said that they would prefer sharing their input in more of a **1:1 interview** setting that offers more privacy and the chance to connect face to face.

Several participants said that using **friends and family** to collect their input is a good option. A couple of participants mentioned that **Youth Programs** could collect their input, but would work best if these programs already focus on life skills, and warned that programs will become too boring if the activities aren’t fun. Providing **food** was recommended.

Participants urged that when adults seek input from youth, adults should be prepared to **“Listen to us and actually do something instead of wasting both of our times on false promises.”**

Youth-Adult Partnerships

Participants shared several ways that can help youth and adults work together. The best approach is to **build a relationship with the youth by treating them with respect**, listening to them, and getting to know them by building assets (mentoring, volunteering/community service, sports and sharing other similar interests, and just talking). Respect is extremely important to youth. They stressed that adults should not talk down to youth or lecture youth but **listen to understand and value youths’ opinions**. Further, they should engage in conversations and open communication, make sure that youth know what their role is, and provide follow-through when feedback is collected. “Communication games” or “Team Projects” could be approaches for facilitating youth-adult partnerships. “Educate adults on how to talk to youth and follow through on important questions/responses.” Adults should be aware of microaggressions and stop committing them.

Participation in a Youth Summit and Ongoing Engagement

There was considerable interest among youth to participate in ongoing engagement opportunities, including a Summit designed by youth where they can learn more about issues that youth face and discuss solutions. Issues that they would like to discuss include: preparing for adult life and college, anti-racism, mental health, how to effect social change and be a community change agent, fixing the education system and teacher quality, and mitigating inadequate staffing so that youth get their needs met. The issue that the participants most wanted to discuss was **mental health**. They also would like opportunities to **talk directly with their School Board and City Council**.

Recommendations to Consider

Based on the feedback that was collected from the youth focus groups, the following recommendations are provided for future action:

Recommendation #1: Offer creative, inclusive, and flexible youth programs that foster social connection and a sense of belonging and promote their behavioral health. Actions include:

- **Build community and positive relationships.** Create a supportive and fun environment that fosters a sense of belonging, unity, acceptance, friendships, interdependency, and positive relationships between adults and youth. Offer more fun social events.
- **Connect youth to a variety of creative and flexible programs** for young people, including creative arts and cultural activities, sports, volunteering, tutoring, STEM, skill building, and others.
- **Understand the mental health needs of youth and provide them with support.** Youth need someone to talk to about their mental health and how to deal with stress, school safety, anxiety, and eating disorders.
- **Focus on the needs of immigrant youth and provide them with opportunities** to speak up and feel heard, meet youth from different cultures, and to learn English.

Current Efforts/Recent Accomplishments:

- **Youth participated in City-Sponsored Teen Block Parties, Teen Pool Nights, and quarterly Titan Takeovers** – all events for teens to have dinner and a night fun with their friends

- **100+ resources for helping youth cope** with uncertainty and traumatic events are included on [RAISE's webpage](#)
- **21 workshops on ACES, trauma, and resilience have been delivered to 545 community members** this past year
- **4 school-based mental health professionals have been added** to the Children and Family Behavioral Health Services Team which is based in every ACPS school campus.

Recommendation #2: Promote youth safety and resilience by supporting the city-wide adoption of the developmental assets framework, establishing strong support systems at school, and co-creating solutions with youth. Actions include:

- **Build Developmental Relationships.** Build close relationships through which young people feel supported by adults to discover who they are, build upon their abilities and interests, lead, and learn how to engage and contribute to the world around them. Adults should get to know the youth they encounter and show that they care.
- **Create leadership and mentoring opportunities.** Enriching learning opportunities are just as important as developmental mentorship programs for youth and young adults.
- **Establish strong support systems at school.** Strengthen the learning environment to ensure that youth have access to supportive teachers and adults to talk to, effective policies and procedures in place to ensure school and community safety, and access to accurate and timely information.
- **Facilitate open dialogue with students about "police presence" at school.** Because not all youth share the same perspective and lived experiences when it comes to interacting with police, it's recommended that ongoing listening sessions are held with youth to understand and identify a solutions/policy that ensures everyone's sense of safety.
- **Create access to quiet spaces for youth.** Remove barriers and provide opportunities for youth to access quiet spaces like libraries and empty rooms where youth can safely be alone.
- **Talk with young people and provide them with the tools needed to manage their fears,** build resilience, and learn to calm themselves down, even when things feel scary.
- **Avoid passing anxiety on to children and youth** by learning techniques to manage stress in a healthy way. As a city, creating a culture of self- and community-care.
- **Involve youth in reviewing, revising, and creating school and city policies.** Youth input would be beneficial when making decisions and designing policies and solutions that affect them.
- **Stop the spread of misinformation.** Create opportunities to talk to youth about the news they are exposed to on social media and tv and help them develop media-literacy skills.
- **Avoid exposing youth to guns and weapons in schools and community settings.** Consider implementing weapons-free school and community zones.

Current Efforts/Recent Accomplishments:

- **400+ youth service providers, mentors, educators, parents** have been trained in Developmental Assets
- **16 mentoring programs** are now members of the [Alexandria Mentoring Partnership](#), which is actively building a Mentor University.
- **50+ youth participated in the Alexandria Youth Leadership Conference** last summer which empowers emerging young leaders through training and connection to community resources

Recommendation #3: Use a variety of methods and partnerships to creatively engage young people and ensure that they are aware of the resources and programs available to them. Actions include:

- **Use local institutions – especially schools - as a resource hub for youth.** Leverage the places where youth already are to build awareness of and connect young people to youth resources.
- **Develop a communication strategy that uses a variety of methods to ensure that youth are aware of programs that are available to them.** This includes the use of apps, email, eNewsletters, social media; schools and school-based programs; phone calls and text messages; word of mouth and in person methods; the City’s website; afterschool programs; and the news. These are all ways to reach youth with information about resources, opportunities, programs, and events. The school announcements throughout the day, school cafeteria, and teachers are other key mechanisms to promote resources.
- **Collaborate with schools, businesses, sport venues, nonprofits, community sites, and youth organizations to communicate resources, programs, and opportunities with youth.**
- **Allocate time for school staff to check-in with youth and ensure that all schools have robust health services on-site or accessible to the students.** Youth who are struggling with their mental health need someone to talk to and need to first manage their anxiety before they are ready to learn.
- **Engage youth in developmentally appropriate activities and topics that are important to them and relevant to their lived experiences.** When engaging elementary and middle school youth, focus on building awareness, life skills, and confidence. When engaging high school youth, emphasize leadership, applying and preparing for college, career development, and individualized opportunities.
- **Conduct outreach during afterschool hours and use school announcements throughout the school day** to provide students with information.
- **When collecting input from youth, use methods that they deem effective, such as:** phone calls, text messages, focus groups and listening sessions, 1:1 interviews, recruiting people who they trust (i.e. friends and family, teachers, and youth program leaders) to collect feedback.
- **Provide youth with food and stipends and/or volunteer hours.** Value the time and contributions of young people by taking their recommendations seriously and showing that their time and effort are valued. Stipends communicate the value of young people’s time, reduce barriers to program participation, and provide additional supports to families and communities.
- **Listen to youth.** Groups and institutions that engage with youth can demonstrate that they are organizations that listen to youth by asking questions, getting guidance from youth and making changes based on needs and ideas they express.

Current Efforts/Recent Accomplishments:

- **255 people follow Alex Teen Life**, the City's Social Media account dedicated to communicating information, resources, and facts with youth about health, relationships, and more
- [**Resource Directory for Youth and Young Adults**](#) includes hundreds of resources that promote youth well-being in Alexandria
- **Through workshops and trips to college campuses, Project Discovery** provides vital information to low-income and first-generation youth about how to prepare for college
- **A Community Resource Corner** will be piloted at George Washington Middle School to introduce students to local resources

Recommendation #4: Build effective Youth-Adult Partnerships by providing adults with ongoing trainings and technical assistance to promote positive youth development, and by providing youth with a strong foundation and opportunities to participate in decision and policy making with adults. Actions include:

- **Prepare adults to effectively support young people.** All staff, mentors, and volunteers who work with youth should be trained in Developmental Assets, Youth Mental Health First Aid, cultural humility, bias and microaggressions, and youth-adult partnerships.
- **Adults who work and volunteer with youth can build relationships with youth by treating them with respect, listening to them, and getting to know them by engaging in activities that build assets** (mentoring, volunteering/community service, sports and sharing other similar interests, and just talking). Do not talk down to youth or lecture youth but listen to understand and value youths' opinions.
- **Connect youth with decision- and policy makers** by providing them with more opportunities to talk directly with those who make decisions that impact their lives, including the School Board and City Council.

Current Efforts/Recent Accomplishments:

- **Hundreds of students are connected directly to decision and policy makers** through a partnership between ACPS teachers and City staff (through the Youth Civics Academy, CivicTrek, Project Citizen, and Civic Action Projects with 8th and 12th grade students)
- **Boards and Commissions interested in working with youth** are provided with a Youth-Adult Partnerships training

Recommendation #5: When asking youth for their input and feedback, it is critical that adults listen, take their ideas seriously, and hold themselves accountable to respond to their concerns.

Actions include:

- **Empower young people decide on the topics and issues that matter most to them.** Issues that they would like to discuss at a Youth Summit include mental health (named as the most pressing issue), preparing for adult life and college, anti-racism, how to effect social change and be a community change agent, fixing the education system and teacher quality, and mitigating inadequate staffing so that youth get their needs met.
- **Do something with youth's recommendations.** Prioritize accountability by responding to and following up on youth's recommendations. When adults request youth input, they must share what they did with that input, and how they will continue to engage with young people.

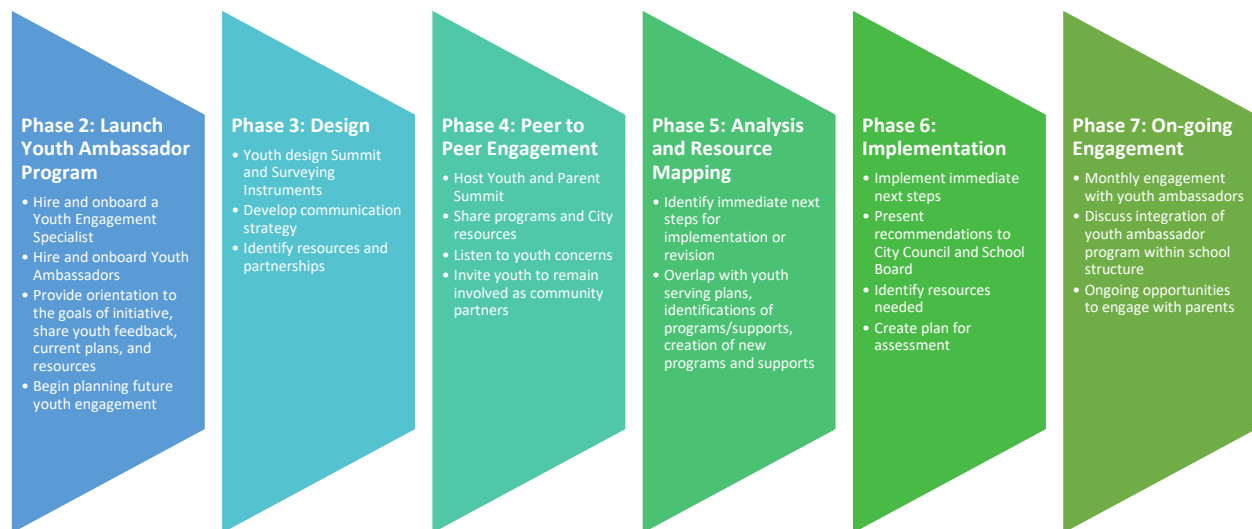
Current Efforts/Recent Accomplishments:

- **1,800+ youth in Alexandria were engaged** in an hour-long workshops and weekly planning sessions where they were encouraged to share their dreams for their future and ideas for how to make those dreams a reality. The result is a [plan](#) that centers equity while preventing trauma and promoting their health, safety, and wellbeing.
- **Youth Speak Up Event on Youth Mental Health** will be held in January to engage dozens of parents, youth, service providers, and local leaders in a youth-led forum about mental health

Conclusion and Next Steps

Moving forward, the City of Alexandria and its partners will continue to focus on creating collaborative and youth empowering systems that dismantle oppressive practices, center equity, and cultivate meaningful relationships so all youth can thrive. To promote youth safety and resilience and create the change we want to see, adults must practice authentic youth engagement. Adults can begin by asking, “How have we engaged youth in this work?” This simple but powerful question can reveal gaps in youth engagement, center youth in decision making, and create shared accountability. While youth engagement will look different in different settings, youth voice can be implemented to advance equity in any part of the community. Finally, it is important to recognize that fostering youth engagement, safety, and resilience is a shared responsibility, not just one organization, department, team, or solely on the shoulders of parents—it is a community effort.

The following are the key next steps in advancing Youth Safety and Resilience in the City of Alexandria:



Phase 2 is complete and the Youth Ambassadors are actively engaged in Phase 3.